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THE EFFECT OF FANNY BRAWNE ON JOHN KEATS

By

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A B S T R A C T

In November 1818 Keats, who had suffered an inferiority complex in his relationship with women, met Fanny Brawne and immediately fell in love with her. This love was the catalyst necessary for The Eve of St. Agnes in February and probably was largely responsible for the lull in his creativity in March and April. When Keats and Fanny were both living at Wentworth Place, the poet was in a tranquil enough state to have the incredible flow of poetry come in the fertile weeks of May and June. Yet, at the same time Keats was happily in love and creating the odes, he also feared that love was destroying him by taking away his freedom. As a result, he underwent a self-imposed exile from Fanny by spending July, August and September on the Isle of Wight, where he hoped to return to the writing of a major poem. He missed Fanny greatly and felt the pangs of love to the point that he recognized his freedom from the girl could no longer be. In October, he returned to Wentworth Place and became engaged. Only increasing tuberculosis and financial woes kept him from writing more. The love continued to grow and give Keats pain as well as pleasure. The pain by then stemmed from his knowledge that he could never marry the girl he loved and thus gain mortal peace.

The conclusion which must be drawn about this affair is that Fanny was primarily a good influence on Keats as a man and as a poet. While she sometimes caused him great pain, she served as the catalyst necessary for Keats to produce the poetry written in the spring of 1819.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

There can be no doubt that Fanny Brawne was instrumental in helping Keats become a great poet. Certainly the love affair between the two is among the more celebrated ones because of its pathetic and hopeless character. In time, scholars have been able to escape the personalities, doubts, jealousies and secrecy surrounding and discoloring the affair throughout the years to find the true character of the affair.

There are really three stages to this romance: November and December 1818; January through October 1819; and November 1819 through February 23, 1821. A thorough examination of each period should present a broader understanding of the affair itself, of its influence on Keats's poetry, and of human nature.

I

On June 10, 1818, John Keats, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey stated:

> I have two Brothers one is driven by the 'burden of society' to America the other, with an exquisite love of Life, is in a lingering state - My Love for my Brothers from the early loss of our parents and even earlier Misfortunes has grown into a affection 'passing the Love of Women' - I have been ill temper'd with them, I have vex'd them - but the thought of them has always stifled the impression that any woman might otherwise have made on me.[1]

Like most self-confirmed bachelors, Keats, without realizing it, was ready to fall in love. A thorough examination of the thoughts behind this letter and his actions from June 10 through December 25, 1818, will show why Keats was so susceptible to Fanny Brawne's charm when he first met her.

One of the strongest reasons for his apparent misogyny was the relationship he had had with his mother. Frances Jenning Keats poured affection unrestrainedly upon her children while her husband Tom was alive, but shortly after his accidental death in 1804, she married William Rawlings and deserted her offspring. This hasty remarriage was a staggering blow to her eldest son.

> The very foundations of his security had been knocked out from underneath him. ... The idealized woman of his crucial early experience, beautiful and recklessly affectionate, had betrayed and abandoned him in a manner beyond

his understanding, and forever afterward he was haunted by the fear that any woman he loved would play him false and leave him. The boy began to develop a wariness in his dealings with others, beneath his instinctive openness and spontaneity; 'All my life I have suspected every Body,' Keats later wrote; and though his biographies have discounted this statement, he had good reason for making it.[2]

Young Keats had only four years to purge the memory of his mother's betrayal from his mind, attempt to regather his bearings, and find a new meaning in life before she again returned. Whatever defense mechanisms he had built against her treacherous actions were shattered in 1808, when his mother

> returned to her family in Edmonton, crippled with rheumatism in her early thirties, evidently broken in both body and spirit. To Keats, on the threshold of adolescence, the sight of her faded beauty and dimming vitality must have been a deeply troubling experience. Then in 1809, her illness changed disastrously for the worse. She too developed signs of consumption . . . [The change Keats had to watch in his mother's condition] shook him to his depths. All the devotion he had felt to her as a child came surging back, redoubled by the passion of early adolescence.[3]

Hence the deprivation, rediscovery, and final loss of his mother placed within Keats a drastic dichotomy of attitudes toward women. He loved the warmth and affection they could kindle within him; yet he dreaded the possibility of being deceived by these same creatures. Thus he established the deliberate defense mechanism that he cited to Bailey without realizing that it could never

function completely against a woman who offered him the love he craved and needed. While few critics have supported Miss Ward's claim, it is one which deserves some attention in that it can help explain the depth of Keats's later love and resulting jealousy for Fanny. Possibly the older critics might not have placed the cause of Keats's jealousy of Fanny's actions had they understood the relationship between Keats and his mother. Had the scholars not been so obtuse, Fanny's reputation would not have been sullied for a hundred years.

Another factor in Keats's change in mind about women could easily have been the recurrent sore throat and general ill health he encountered on his Scottish walking tour with Brown.[4] Keats, with his medical training and experience of nursing his consumptive mother, may have gained insight into the possibility that he too had contracted tuberculosis. If this were the case, he could possibly have desired to openly seek love in an attempt to lead as full a life as possible in the short time he knew was afforded to him. The linking of Keats's power of diagnosis and his critical talents is dangerous, but it sheds light on the matter at hand. His critical powers cannot be treated lightly in view that his criticisms of

Endymion, unlike the more notorious ones, dealt with the faults of the poem and thus were apropos and valuable. It is highly improbable that a man with the sensitive acumen Keats possessed would not utilize his own medical training to determine his health if he correctly and constantly criticized everything else he did.

When Keats returned from Scotland in August 1818, he was confronted by the drastic decline in Tom's health. Once again consumption had struck the Keats family, and John knew that his younger brother did not have long to live. As a result, he moved in with Tom at the Bentleys' to nurse him, a job requiring constant attention. The nursing itself was depressing, but so were two other things: the isolation from his friends and the knowledge of Tom's imminent death. Keats's dependence upon his brothers as the sole recipients of his love was rapidly becoming empty through Tom's decreasing health and George's absence of 3000 miles. Obviously Keats would have to turn to another sponge for the absorption of his love, and the only recourse open to him was women. "Keats was vulnerable to Fanny's horseplay because of Tom's death. His response to her provocations was a good and natural rebound from Tom's death."5/

One other point should be mentioned here as a factor in Keats's change of mind about life. The notorious reviews of Endymion appeared about this point in Keats's life, and while they did not, as various of his contemporaries asserted, utterly destroy him, they must have hit home to a certain degree if for no other reasons than that they expressed some of his own misgivings about Hyperion and they came when he was greatly depressed by Tom's illness.

The first woman other than his mother to have a great effect on Keats was his sister-in-law, Georgiana Augusta Wylie Keats. John adored her and envied the happy life she and his brother George led together. His devotion to her is found in several light-hearted poems addressed to her[6/] and almost every letter written to the American Keatses.

The following letter displays his love for Georgiana as well as his attitude toward marriage.

> Notwithstand your happiness and your recommendation I hope I shall never marry. ... Your content in each other is a delight to me which I cannot express - the Moon is now shining full and brilliant - she is the same to me in Matter, what you are to me in Spirit - If you were here my dear sister I could not pronounce the words which I can write to you from a distance: I have a tenderness for you, and an Admiration which I feel to be as great and more chaste than I have for any woman in the world. You will mention Fanny [Keats] - her character is not formed; her identity does not press upon me as yours does. I hope from the bottom of my heart that I may

> one day feel as much for her as I do for you - I know not how it is, but I have never made any acquaintance of my own - nearly all through your medium my dear Brother - Through you I Know not only a Sister but a glorious human being.[7]

This letter is fascinating in that it really amounts to a love letter written to a woman whom, because of her relationship to him, he cannot love the way he needs to love a woman. It displays the earnestness and youthful naïvete of his love, and it shows that Keats could not exist much longer without a strong and fulfilling love of his own.

In September 1818, the Reynolds sisters introduced Keats to their cousin Jane Cox, and in the already once-quoted October letter Keats discusses her.

> I like her because one has no sensations - what we both are is taken for granted - ... They [the Reynolds sisters] think I don't admire her because I did not stare at her - They call her flirt to me - What a want of knowledge? she walks across a room in such a manner that Man is drawn towards her with a magnetic Power. This they call flirting! They do not know things. They do not know what a woman is. I believe tho' she has faults - the same Charmian and Cleopatra might have had - Yet she is a fine thing speaking in a worldly way; for there are two distinct tempers of mind in which we judge of things - the worldly, theatrical and pantomimical; and the unearthly, spiritual and etherial - in the former Buonaparte, Lord Byron and this Charmian hold first place in our Minds; in the latter John Howard, Bishop Hooker rocking his child's cradle, and you my dear Sister are the conquering feelings. As a Man in the world I love the rich talk of a Charmian; as an eternal Being I love the thought of you. I should like her to ruin me, and I should like you to save me.[8]

Certainly this letter emphasizes the purity of Keats's love for Georgiana, his ethereal creature; but more

interestingly, it shows his reaction to Jane Cox, his Charmian. He was obviously aware of her sexuality, and he wanted to partake of it. At the same time, he recognized that this girl could not fulfill his need for love even if she could possibly grant him sexual gratification. There is no doubt, however, that Keats had been awakened by the feminine mystique and that he was growing far from his harsh denial of women found in the June letter to Bailey.

In the summer of 1817, Keats first met Mrs. Isabella Jones at the village of Bo-Peep. Here he had "an adventure with an enigmatic and mysterious young woman, whose exact status he could never make out, but who was to move increasingly in the same literary circles as himself."[9] She was beautiful, talented, witty, and lively; and Keats, while carrying on a flirtation, was sexually stirred by her. She reciprocated to a certain degree by offering him comfort but stopping short of love.[9] Keats did not see her again for over a year, but in October 1818, he accidentally met her on the street and reopened his acquaintance, but with little success. Keats's account of this meeting is amusing and disarming,[10] and it shows that, while his various advances were stymied by Mrs. Jones, he certainly was interested in femininity.

If all these factors are taken into consideration, there can be no doubt that Keats was, for a variety of reasons, moving away from his careful and deliberate state of self-declared misogyny to a position of extreme susceptibility for feminine charm. When he was clearly in a state of flux, he met Fanny Brawne and fell hopelessly in love with her.

At the age of eighteen, Fanny Brawne was the girl possessing all the necessary traits to make John Keats fall in love at a time when he was without question ready; in fact, when he found it necessary to find this love. Here then is the girl who became his life partner.

Fanny came from rather good stock. Her father, Samuel Brawne, who died of consumption in 1810, was the cousin of the great social lion, Beau Brummell. Mrs. Brawne, a member of the Ricketts family, a wealthy clan which included various administrators of West Indian colonies, had a large enough independent income to live comfortably.11/

To establish most effectively what Fanny was like when Keats met her, we turn to his letters.

> Mrs. Brawne who took Brown's house for the Summer, still resides in Hampstead - she is a very nice woman - and her daughter senior is I think beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange we have a little tiff now and then - and she behaves a little better.12/
>
> Shall I give you Miss Brawn? She is about my height - with a fine style of countenance of the lengthen'd sort - she wants sentiment in every feature - she

> manages to make her hair look well - her nostrills are fine - though a little painful - her mouth is bad and good - her Profil is better than her full-face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone - Her shape is very graceful and so are her movements - her Arms are good her hands badish - her feet tolerable - she is not seventeen - but she is ignorant - monstrous in her behavior flying out in all directions, calling people such names - that I was forced lately to make use of the term Minx - this is I think not from any innate vice but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly. I am however tired of such style and shall decline any more of it - She had a friend to visit her lately - you have known plenty such - her face is raw as if she was standing out in a frost - her lips raw and seem always ready for a Pullet - she plays the Music without one sensation but the feel of wory at her fingers - she is a downright Miss without one set off - we hated her and smoked her and baited her, and I think drove her away - Miss B____ thinks her a paragon of fashion, and says she is the only woman she would change places with - What a Stripe - She is superior as a Rose to a Dandelion.[13]

There remains extrapolation to be made from these fragments if the real Fanny Brawne is to step forward, but Keats's description is valuable in that it displays as much of his fascination for Fanny as it does of the girl herself.

First of all, Fanny was born on August 9, 1800; hence, she was eighteen when Keats met her, not seventeen as he reports to George and Georgiana. This mistake points to a striking characteristic in Fanny: that she appeared younger than she actually was. Certainly impetuosity, vivacity, and lack of poise while being complimented[14] coupled with her small stature helped deceive Keats.

Physically Fanny was a "brisk, blooming, very young beauty, of the far from uncommon English hawk blonde type, with aquiline nose and retreating forehead, sharp-cut nostril and gray-blue eye, a slight, shapely figure rather short than tall, a taking smile, and good hair, carriage, and complexion."[15] She was not conventionally beautiful, but she knew the value of fashion to enhance her appearance.[16] Her size and sense of both style and fashion certainly attracted Keats, but it was not until he looked at her as a person and became dazzled, confused, delighted, frustrated, and jealous that he fell in love with the full Fanny Brawne. The "little tiffs" he mentions to George merely hint at what was really going on in Keats's head when he wrote that letter.

That Keats and Fanny felt strong physical desire and love for each other was strongly supported by Amy Lowell:

> At the time Keats met her, Fanny Brawne was just eighteen. That she had enough sweetness and depth of character to fall in love with the poet, I think there can be no doubt; and I believe she thoroughly satisfied the passionate part of Keats's love, satisfied it to a painful extent considering that they could not marry. She kept Keats in a burning agitation of desire which, under the circumstances, she was powerless to gratify. How much of this she may have understood, we have not as yet sufficient means of knowing. But the other side of love, the maternal side, she scarcely seems to have been mature enough to comprehend. She certainly developed, and grew more tender, as time went on; but the mothering which Keats so sorely needed, she had only begun to learn to give him when he died.[17]

Fanny was used to the fashionable convention and she liked it. She loved dancing, being with people, and attending other social events of any kind.18/ She had schooled herself in the social graces and had become a successful flirt as well as a witty and lively conversationalist. "She seems to have been something of a 'rattle', as it used to be called, liking smart sallies and badinage, and an innocent measure of flirtation."19/ "Fanny craved admiration and endeavored to get it by affecting those airs and wiles which were fashionable in her period."20/ It was this trait of Fanny that really put her in disrepute among the Keats scholars until Amy Lowell showed her to be an admirable young lady.

Her penchant for wit and abilities to concentrate stringently tended to drive sentimentality from her, a lack Keats found attractive as he was an anti-sentimentalist.21/ In its place were a self-contained efficiency and an active intellect, two traits which forced her to read incessantly but without apparent discrimination.

> I wish I knew what books you have read for I would write about them, there is nothing I like better to talk about unless it is to such a very great judge that I am affraid they will think all my delightful criticism nonsense. So I hope you are not one of these terrible persons or will not let me know about it for depend on it I should neither open my lips or move my pen on the subject and so you would lose the benefit of my opinion - I must also beg you will not learn whole verses or chapters etc. to dodge me for though I can remember pretty

well generally I read too many things to do so particularly - so what you may take for a proof of stupidity, is on the contrary through the great extensiveness of my studies.22/

I am by no means a great poetry reader - and like few things not comic out of Shakespeare. Comedy of all sorts pleases me.23/

At the same time she read incessantly, she continued her study of various languages: French, German, and Spanish. When Keats met her, Fanny was well schooled in French and was learning German. This thirst for languages stemmed not from literary pretentions but from a desire to move in and understand a larger world.24/ Her interests in politics and any other subject she happened to be reading about found ways into her conversation and supported the idea that Fanny, by being interested in the world around her, was more than a mere flirt attracting John Keats.

Hence Fanny was pretty, gay and fascinating. "She was, as he himself had been during his Byronic student days, unformed, fluid, and trying to work out a personality."25/ And with this unsettled air about her, "Fanny Brawne entered the life of Keats with exquisite precision, when marriage was in his mind, when he was losing his forced indifference to women, when he was profoundly in need of gaiety and comfort. He loved her irrevocably, and at once."26/

One of the more difficult problems in the examination of the love affair of Keats and Fanny is the establishment of precise dates. Questions have arisen most commonly over the dating of their first meeting and, later, their engagement. This segment of the paper, by examining the proposed dates presented by various scholars, should conclusively demonstrate that Keats met Fanny shortly after October 14, 1818.

Of all the scholarly opinions, the ones suggesting the middle to late November date of meeting seem to carry the greatest validity. Certainly Miss Brawne's statement to Fanny Keats is suspect as a basis for scholarly opinion.[27] Mr. Edgecumbe and Miss Lowell seem to fly against the evidence presented by Dilke. One other idea attacking the August or September meeting is Keats's own ill health when he returned from Scotland. Certainly he was incapacitated for some weeks and then recovered only to nurse Tom. Miss Richardson's, Mr. Bate's and Mr. Gittings' claims that during October Keats was filled with the fascinations of both Jane Cox and Isabella Jones cannot be ignored in light of the already oft-quoted letter to George and Georgiana Keats of October 14, 1818.[28] If this letter is coupled with one Keats later wrote to Fanny, the one in which he says: "I have, believe me, not been an age in telling you take possession of me; the very first week I knew you I wrote

my self your vassal; ..."[29], there can be no doubt that Keats didn't meet Fanny until at least late October. If he had met Fanny previous to the composition of his October 14 letter and if he were so instantly smitten by Fanny as he claims to have been, he would not have devoted so much time and space in that letter to Jane Cox and Isabella Jones, as they would have been supplanted by his new beauty. Also, Murry's claim of the December meeting date is too late because it leaves far too little time for Keats to meet Fanny, come to grips with his grief for Tom's death, and ready himself for some sub-engagement declaration on Christmas Day 1818.[30] Hence the middle to late November seems to be the only feasible time for the first meeting between Keats and Fanny.

In this section only one other question remains - What happened on Christmas Day 1818? With the answer, the curtain can be closed on the year 1818.

Although three scholars[31] suggest that Keats and Fanny became engaged on the date in question, their arguments, which will be presented later, have been readily refuted. There can be, however, no question that some action of major consequence occurred on that Christmas Day because, if one hadn't, Fanny would never have called that day "the happiest day I ever spent."[32] Aileen Ward's theory that Keats and Fanny mutually declared their love without

committing themselves to a formal engagement and that they also exchanged Christmas gifts is intriguing and alluring.[33] In this article, she successfully attacks Gittings' position that Keats was still seeing Isabella Jones at that time and then suggests the identity of the gifts exchanged by the two lovers. While Miss Ward readily admits that her identification of the lyre seal as Fanny's gift to Keats is pure conjecture, she supports the possibility effectively. She also demonstrates why Keats's gift of the Literary Pocket Book was both a feasible and natural present for Fanny.

While the certainty of Miss Ward's claims will probably never be assured, there can be no doubt that a very important thing happened to both Keats and Fanny on that day. Fanny's letter to Fanny Keats adequately demonstrates her feelings and Keats's "sudden spurt of productiveness, beginning in January 1819, with The Eve of St. Agnes, and then, after a vacant interval, bursting out in magnificent effervescence with La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, and the less important odes To Psyche, On Melancholy, and On Indolence"[34] demonstrates a newly found peace of mind in which creativity could run rampant. Hence, the obvious assumption left open is that Keats's newly found and declared love solved many of his problems and opened the door to a mature creativity which Keats hitherto had not seen.

II

Certainly the events of December 1818 caused Keats to run the gamut of emotions from deep desolation to ardor's ecstasies. Tom's death on December 2 left Keats in an incredible funk; yet twenty-three days later, when he declared his intentions to Fanny, he was riding the crest of love. One thing bothering Keats's scholars is the fallow period of poetry from February, after he had written The Eve of St. Agnes, to mid-April, 1819. There seem to be a variety of causes for this idle stretch, not the least of which is Keats's love for Fanny.

Most biographers of Keats have recognized that Tom's death had a tremendous effect on his older brother, even though Keats, who had been nursing Tom, knew that death was imminent. They cite the letter of December 16 to George and Georgiana[35] as an expression of the resultant fatigue, confusion, and despair. Most fail to show, however, these lines:

> My friends have been exceedingly kind to me every one of them - Brown detained me at his House. I suppose no one could have had their time made smoother than mine has been . . . Within this last Week I have been every where . . .[36]

Yet these remarks are vital to the understanding of the period in question because they establish a natural situation. When a person dies, his friends quickly and diligently console the surviving members of the family. It is not long, however,

until the kind-hearted must return to their normal routines and thus leave the mourners to their own devices. What happens then is that the survivors enter a period of fatigue and emotional vacuum through their being forced to come to grips with reality and continue in their endeavors. This emotional nadir may last for a quite extensive period; and obviously, despite Fanny's love, Keats's depression, although temporarily broken in January, lasted slightly more than three months.

Love itself sent Keats through another spectrum of emotions and upset his normal routine. In the letter announcing Tom's death to George and Georgiana is also a catalog of his activities from December 16 through January 4. Nowhere in this letter is mention made of his Christmas activities; yet far more trivial matters appear:

> This poses a problem: from now on Keats's letters, even to George, record the trivia rather than the significant facts of his experience. From the time Fanny Brawne claimed the center of the stage, a curtain of secrecy drops around the central situation of Keats's life, and only a few stray facts and random observations in his letters, and the still more cryptic record of the poems, give a hint of the drama behind.[37]

Miss Ward's comments must be tempered to the point of excluding Keats's letters, especially the later ones, to Fanny because they do express "the drama behind" as well as the trivia.

> Fanny Brawne, then - alternately a feast and a fever - is the key to these first quiet weeks in January.[38]

Again Miss Ward's comments must be tempered by the remaining sense of grief that Keats still felt and by his fascination and fear of both love and women that has been cited earlier.

In an interesting article with a very questionable conclusion, Stanley Russell traces Keats's changing attitude towards love and suggests:

> Love was a threat to Keats, a threat to his poetic creativity, to his identity as an artist. Yes, identity. For in spite of what he had to say about the artist's having no identity[39] the consciousness of his dedication to poetry was driven home forcibly when he was faced with the concrete realization of the corrosive force of "self-destroying" love.[40]

Mr. Russell continues to claim that basically Keats's affair with Fanny destroyed his ability to write first-rate poetry. It is unfortunate that his claim, one quite similar to John Middleton Murry's in Keats and Shakespeare, has been unquestionably refuted by scholars[41] who have looked at the Keats-Brawne relationship with sympathy and understanding. The value of Mr. Russell's cited passage lies in a philosophical plane, however, as it is impossible to ignore Keats's infatuation with the concept of love, which certainly appeared in his earlier poetry; namely, Endymion. There can be no question that Keats did worry about the effect of love on the creativity of man, and it is highly possible that this problem hit him with full force upon his realizing that he was in love. What he had considered indecisively on a theoretical level now had to be met on a practical plane.

The emotional half of Keats had to meet and satisfy the rational half so that the whole man could love and write at the same time.

In terms of love Keats had to face one other major consideration during this three-month period. He had to become acquainted with the girl he loved. He had to escape emotional magnetism and understand her as an operating human being. We have already seen that she, like most people worth loving, was a walking mass of contradictions, and she must have kept her new lover in constant agony.

> Keats . . . soon . . . became the declared and accepted lover of Fanny Brawne, savoring intensely thenceforward all the tantalising sweets and bitters of that estate . . . . From first he suffered severely from the sense of her freedom to enjoy pleasures and excitements for which neither his health nor his social habits and inclinations fitted him.[42]

Hence, Keats was faced to the fullest extent with the problem of love. His routine was upset in that he became secretive about his personal feelings, and his emotional upheavals temporarily adversely affected his ability and inclination to think clearly. He, in what appears to be a contradiction, was forced into a basic philosophical debate about love. Certainly, while pondering this problem, Keats was hardly able to come to grips with his other troubles, which ranged from Abbey's unpleasant activities with the Keats's purse strings to his own inability to complete Hyperion largely because of a shifting poetic philosophy.

> _Hyperion_ was abandoned as much because the manner and the mythology were strangling the idea, as because the idea was confusing and rendering inconsequent the mythology. Perhaps an even deeper reason however was that Keats himself shared the darkness of Apollo, and discovered that Mnemosyne could not enlighten him. He had exaggerated the virtue and capacity of "the old dispensation," and he could not yet vision clearly the new. The two had mingled confusedly in his mind, the appeal of nature to his senses and the appeal of truth to his reason, and only after writing _Hyperion_ did he discover their absolute distinction in kind.43/

Mr. Finney best summarizes Keats's problem.

> While Keats remained in Hampstead, seeing Miss Brawne every day, he was too much agitated by love to express it in poetry. When he went to Chichester about January 18, however, his imagination, freed from the overpowering emotions which she [Fanny] excited in him, intuited his love for her in the objective symbols of poetry, drawing these symbols from the story of Romeo and Juliet and the amorous rites of St. Agnes' Eve.
>
> Keats's love for Miss Brawne determined the form as well as the matter of _The Eve of St. Agnes_. In December 1818 he was composing _Hyperion_ in the "naked and grecian" style of Milton's "Paradise Lost". Love, however, lured him out of the mood of the Greek epic into the mood of the metrical romance. He composed _The Eve of St. Agnes_, accordingly, in the sensuous, romantic style of Spenser's _Fairie Queene_.44/

Finney then continues to demonstrate that Keats's use of Spenserian sensuousness improved his freedom of expression, but the most important thing to note here is that it was Keats's love for Fanny which triggered the shift and allowed him to escape the trap of _Hyperion_ and produce the exquisite _Eve of St. Agnes_. Love was the catalyst Keats needed to escape his personal grief and overcome his philosophic dilemmas in order to write great poetry. Hence, when he

left Hampstead for Hampshire, he was in the proper frame of mind to write; and when he reached there, he was physically separated from Fanny and thus able to concentrate on his work. Her love, however, permeated him and gave him the need for productivity.

> It is significant, then, that a few weeks after this day [Christmas 1818] Keats began a long poem in celebration of young love, set against a background of good food and music, revelry and rich attire, in which the lovers steal away from a midwinter festivity to open their hearts to each other. The Eve of St. Agnes is Keats's commentary on the hidden drama of his life at this time.[45]

Although "The Eve of St. Agnes was the first poem in which Keats was inspired by his love for Fanny Brawne,"[46] the idea of writing a short romance had, ironically enough, been suggested by Isabella Jones[47] when Keats had in early December complained of his inability to complete Hyperion. The idea remained passively in his mind until January, when it was triggered by the majesty of the Stansted Chapel in Chichester, certainly the inspiration for the gothic touches in the poem, and his newly found love for Fanny.[48]

One of the most striking aspects of The Eve of St. Agnes is the intense medieval flavor carried primarily through the cold, barbaric castle, the beadsman, fierce Maurice, and the legend itself. Adding to this flavor is the courtly love tradition, in which the fair lady, the object of the lord's attentions, is placed on a pedestal and worshipped according

to a stringent set of rules, outlined by Andreas Capellanus, in such a way that the lover is lifted spiritually and physically. Under these circumstances, the girl becomes an ideal rather than a person, a Juliet rather than a Charmian, and as a paragon of innocence and purity she is loved accordingly. Madeline is more this ideal than a portrayal of Fanny, who possessed too much personality to be reduced to the cardboard state of the ideal. While she, through Keats's love for her, acted as a catalyst for the poem, she assumes no direct part in it. She does, however, stimulate her lover into reaching to the courtly love tradition and thus heighten the medievalism found in the composition.

Keats, however, does assume the role of Porphyro in the sense that he is the traditional medieval lover in search for the complete love of his lady and in the sense that Porphyro is a human, sensual being seeking a strong physical love.

The traditional medieval aspects of the lover's quest make themselves manifest in Porphyro's braving the weather, the family feud, and the threat of personal danger to see and captivate his fair Madeline. These obvious physical braveries are motivated by the rule of the courtly love tradition which states that a lover must be motivated in his quest by a desire to increase his spiritual level, and this increase is an ultimate goal of the courtly lover.

> The spiritual ascent that is implicit in Porphyro's progress from chamber to chamber becomes clear by the fact that he remains in a closet adjacent to Madeline's chamber, for Keats originally called this closet a "Purgatory sweet" and retained his description of the chamber itself as a "paradise". In other words, Porphyro has transcended the merely human life of the "level chambers" and is now in the purgatory to which he must now move before he can attain the heavenly repetition of earthly happiness. From this purgatory he can look upon "all that he may attain," "Love's own domain". In the Chamber of Maiden-Thought we are intoxicated with the light and atmosphere and see nothing but pleasant wonders; and thus Porphyro looks upon the disrobing Madeline, the ideal revealing its naked perfection. Entranced, breathless, he is wholly engaged in the splendor of the revelation, just as the knight-at-arms sees nothing but the fairy's child because his self is being absorbed; and because each man reaches this stage only within himself as an inward experience of his total self, Porphyro is seeing the "beauty unespied," in close secrecy (163, 166). Here in the Chamber of Maiden-Thought the ascent of the scales of intensities is acted out, and Porphyro and Madeline unite in a mystic blending of mortality and immortality, chastity and passion, the moonlight of perfect form and the ruddiness of intense experience. They have attained a stage where life's self is nourished by its own pith, and they can now progress into the mystery that is the core of life.[49]

When Porphyro enters Madeline's dream, he has achieved an immortality, a tremendous lift in spiritual status, and hence his quest for the spiritual advancement through love has been successful and true to one of the ultimate goals of the courtly love tradition.

The human, sensual being that is Keats in love is found also in Porphyro. One of the things that Keats grew to dislike about the romance as a genre was its vast possibility of sentimentalism. Keats's comment about Isabella, a comment

certainly reflecting this weakness, is reported secondhand in a letter from Woodhouse to Taylor: "He said he could not bear the former [Isabella] now. It appears to him mawkish."50/ "His intention to 'write fine things that cannot be laugh'd at in any way' - laughed at because of their inexperience of life and simplicity of knowledge"51/ also made him fear the romance. But in The Eve of St. Agnes Keats clearly escapes the traps he feared by covering all that might be merely tritely and blatantly sensuous with the heavy spiritual tone carried by the gothic and religious atmospheres. It is impossible, however, to completely ignore the highly sensual descriptions of Madeline's disrobing and the implicit voyeurism when Porphyro is in the "hell" of his closet. It is also imperative to remember that, despite his protestations to Angela, Porphyro has removed himself from the normal and "honorable" actions of the courtly lover in an attempt to trick Madeline into declaring her love. Hence, while he wishes spiritual improvement, he is willing to undergo possible social depredation in his quest. The degree of honor in his character must, as a result of his strange behavior in this situation, be questioned.

> Certainly he [Keats] partially identified himself with Porphyro. When Woodhouse found his revisions objectionable, Keats replied that he should "despise a man who would be such a eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation: & sho^{d} despise himself to write about

> it." One may cite the narrator's obvious relish in Porphyro's situation as Madeline is about to undress - "Now prepare, young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed" (196 f.) - and Keats's later objection to the poem that "in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in Propria Persona I should be apt to quiz it myself." But sexual passion worried him: To Bailey he confessed in July 1818, "When I am among Women I have evil thoughts," and he wrote in his copy of The Anatomy of Melancholy, "There is nothing disgraces me in my own eyes as much as being one of a race of eyes nose and mouth beings in a planet call'd earth who . . . have always mingled goatish winnyish lustful love with the abstract adoration of the deity." Though it has touches of humor, The Eve of St. Agnes is a serious poem, regardless of the extent to which Keats identified with his hero, he introduced enough overtones of evil to make Porphyro's actions wrong within the structure of the poem.[52]

The sensuality of Porphyro and Keats, his creator, comes, not in the cheap description of a girl's undressing, but in a full portrayal of a scene, in which the viewer must utilize every sensory organ to gain full, vicarious impact. Keats's synaesthetic imagery is in full play, and the viewer is too busy absorbing the vast impact of Madeline's heavenly chamber and the activities therein to be titillated by the disrobing and the following sexual activity. Nevertheless, Keats, the sensual lover, shows himself in this scene leaving the reader to feel that the poet psychologically assumes Porphyro's role in an attempt to project his desire for Fanny.

The dream sequence does, of course, help lift the poem to its state of greatness. Madeline seeks a vision in a dream, and Porphyro seeks his real love. The reader is led to expect a happy fulfillment of a traditional situation

and is temporarily reassured by Porphyro's transition from his mortality to the immortality of Madeline's dream and, hence, the success of his endeavors. Yet the alert reader has been aware of a variety of unsettling contrasts sprinkled throughout the poem - cold-warm contrasts, peace-war possibilities shown by Porphyro's desire to see Madeline and avoid Maurice and Hildebrand, youth-age opposites, etc. These lend an unsettling air to the poem, and hence:

> But Madeline's partial awakening from the dream is far from reassuring. In this almost deliberate variation of Adam's dream ("he awoke and found truth"), she finds sight of Porphyro a "painful change": the dream has proved to be more attractive than the reality. These are "sad eyes" that now look at her, while those in her vision had been spiritual and clear". The figure next to her is, in comparison, "pallid, Chill": where are those "looks immortal"? . . . But the finality of what has happened is plain. "St. Agnes' moon hath set," and the storm outside immediately rises. Completely awakening Madeline realizes her situation. ("No dream, alas!"; she is "a deceiv'd thing"; a "traitor has brought Porphyro here; what if he now forsakes her?")53/

While Porphyro reassures her, he is not so powerful in his attempt as one would wish because "the poem ends with no warm, confident response from Madeline . . . . Nor is there any assurance that they [the two lovers] survived."54/

The frame of the love affair, the cold, hate, old age and inevitable death, plays an important part in the development of the poem by isolating and thus intensifying the affair by making it seem more personal, warm, and sensual.

It also adds to the secretiveness of the love - the intensely one-on-one affair, one without outside intervention. Such a desire for secrecy was certainly manifested in Keats's love for Fanny, and this inclusion in the poem, I think, exemplifies Keats's whole attitude toward love. The other aspect carried by the setting is the pervading feeling that all cannot end well. The dreamer must awaken sometime, the mortal must inevitably face death, and the lovers could well fall out of love. Bate's point about the questionable survival of the lovers is well taken, and a query arises as to whether Keats's unveiled question about the future of Porphyro and Madeline carries the veiled question of a similar success of John Keats and love, particularly love with Fanny Brawne. "The intense happiness in love which Keats expressed in the romance of Porphyro and Madeline was, as he foreshadowed in the setting, transient and momentary."55/

> What matters in The Eve of St. Agnes, as in all Keats's other work, is the poetic intention at the front of his mind which called up the words and images from his memory - the felt emotion, the actual experience, the sense of reality which he wished to express. We can only surmise his adventure with Fanny Brawne, though we know something of the actual circumstances of these weeks, from which he could not as yet disentangle his feelings: the frozen fields and the Christmas festivities at Hampstead; his elderly companions and medieval surroundings in Chichester; the baroque splendour of Stansted and the remote quiet of Bedhampton. And yet these very circumstances of warmth and cold, youth and age, sound and silence, all counterpointed against each other, perfectly project the emotion he felt at the unexpected birth of a new love in the time of his sorrow

> after Tom's death . . . . In the authentic feeling of his first master, this is a "song made in lieu of many ornaments in honour of his love."[56]

Whether The Eve of St. Agnes is a good poem depends in the large part on the reader's willingness to find in it a consistency and unity that may not in fact be there. But however it is evaluated, it stands significantly at the beginning of Keats's single great creative year, 1819, and it serves to introduce a preoccupation of all the major poems of the year: that an individual ought not to lose touch with the realities of the world.[57]

The question which then arises is, What are the "realities of the world" to Keats? The one reality becoming increasingly obvious is his preoccupation with the concept of love. Certainly this concern is found in Endymion, and the question of love's effect on the individual is again found in The Eve of St. Agnes.

> In the game of love, Keats knew that his identity was at stake and that disinterestedness was the required trump. That he entered the lists in all seriousness when he met Fanny Brawne speaks for the "one half of the witch" in him, the passionate side of his nature, the natural antagonist of thought and "the philosophic mind." It was this duality in his nature - the duality of sensation as opposed to thought - that he struggled with throughout his adult life. The very fact that he had to struggle is what made love appear to him so "self-destroying".[58]

Herein lies the dilemma of John Keats: How can a highly creative poet not lose touch with "the realities of the world" when the same individual as a highly stimulated lover is urged to forget the realities and join a dream-like existence, thus destroying the urge for awareness? It is

this dilemma which will cause Keats to place himself in self-imposed exile from June to October 1819 in an attempt to ignore the love and concentrate on poetry. Yet he fails to realize that the period from mid-April to June, when he is constantly with Fanny, is his period of greatest poetic output. In any case, the dilemma of love is strongly suggested in The Eve of St. Agnes, and we must watch it develop.

After The Eve of St. Agnes came the Eve of St. Mark, a fragment again reflecting the medieval flavor, but one too muddled and incomplete to judge exactly where Keats intended it to go. Bate demonstrates that the most interesting thing about the poem is its stylistic advances,[59] but he makes no comment about the role of the poem in the development of Keats's dilemma. Yet Murry does: "In the same tide of new inspiration [that causing the composition of The Eve of St. Agnes] he wrote the fragment of The Eve of St. Mark."[60] E. C. Pettet's comment adds to the general feeling that Fanny Brawne was certainly in Keats's mind when he wrote The Eve of St. Mark:

> In The Romantic Agony Mario Praz uses "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" as the title of his chapter on the theme of Fatal Woman. Considering this theme in Keats's poetry, one is tempted to Rossetti's surmise that The Eve of St. Mark . . . was intended to show the remorse of a young girl for the suffering of mind, leading to death, that she had inflicted on her lover.[61]

These comments add to rather than subtract from the mystery arising from this poem and, because the work does not further our understanding of Keats's dilemma, it is best left basically untouched.

The period of Keats's poetic sterility from the middle of February to the middle of April seems to have a varied set of causes, the greatest of which are Keats's frustrating inability to cope with Hyperion and his lack of interest in the shorter poems he had just finished. Bate's analysis of this period covers extensive possibilities, and his dismissal of Keats's love as the major cause seems reasonable: "Any uncertainty he felt about Fanny Brawne was no greater than most love affairs show at the start."62/ One factor certainly affecting this stale period was his complete absorption in the concept of "disinterestedness".

> Yet this feeling ought to be carried to its highest pitch, as there is no fear of its ever injuring society - which it would do I fear pushed to an extremity - For in wild nature the Hawk would loose his Breakfast of Robins and the Robin his of Worms. The Lion must starve as well as the swallow - The greater part of Men make their way from their purposes, the same animal eagerness as the Hawk - The Hawk wants a Mate, so does the Man - look at them both. They set about it and procure one in the same manner . . . This it is that makes the Amusements of Life - to a speculative mind. I go among the Fields and catch a glimpse of a stoat or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass - the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it - I go amongst the buildings of a city and I see a Man hurrying along - to what? The Creature has a purpose and his eyes are bright with it. But

then as Wordsworth says, "we have all one human heart" - there is an eclectic fire in human nature tending to purify - so that among these human creatures there is continually some birth of new heroism - the pity is that we must wonder at it; as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish - . . . Even here though I myself am pursueing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal you can think of - I am however young writing at random - straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness - without knowing the bearing of any one assertion of any one opinion. Yet may I not in this be free from sin? May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind may fall into . . . Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel - By a superior being our reasonings may take the same tone - though erroneous they may be fine - This is the very thing in which consists poetry; and if so it is not so fine a thing as philosophy - For the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth - Give me this credit - Do you not think I strive - to know myself? Give me this credit - and you will not think that on my own account I repeat Milton's lines

> "How charming is divine Philosophy
> Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose
> But musical as Appollo's lute."[63]

The last passage especially is crucial. The speculation that "poetry is not so fine a thing as philosophy" is an intrinsic part of the next development of Keats's thought. It reflects the growing conviction of one of the most consummate stylists in the history of poetry that the impassioned expression of concrete reality, however necessary in poetry, is not by itself enough - that poetry must justify itself on still broader grounds.[64]

Keats explained in this passage the new wisdom which enabled him to bear with calm stoicism the naked and the painful truths which he perceived in nature. This new wisdom, which I call empirical humanism, was an empirical development of his humanistic philosophy of negative capability.[65]

With this thought in mind, Keats rapidly wrote the fragmented third book of Hyperion simply to eliminate the unpleasant burden from his work. He knew that his Apollo, the simpering flower child, could never replace the Titans in grandeur and that, as a result, the poem failed to be justified on broader grounds than "impassioned expression" of a concrete desire.

When Dilke decided to leave Wentworth Place in April, Mrs. Brawne bought his half of the house, Keats must have been disturbed by this happening because "Only one thing seemed certain: he could not live and work in peace with Fanny Brawne next door."66/ Yet almost immediately after the Brawnes moved in came the beginning of Keats's greatest period of productivity. The new concept of "disinterestedness" is coupled with new emotional pangs, causes Keats to produce "As Hermes Once Took to his Feathers Light" almost immediately after his first dinner with the Brawnes in their new surroundings.

> A sense of mysterious release and reunion is worked so delicately in these lines ["As Hermes Once Took to his Feathers Light"] that one hesitates to link them to any actual experience. Still there are strange echoes in this sonnet, of the calm beyond the despair Keats had described in the Cave of Quietude and the warmth of love in Madeline's chilly room, and others far more remote - recollections of a pale and beautiful woman found in a shadowy world of faithless lovers, of a nameless "fair form" to which he remained joined in endless mute satisfaction. Some of these overtones can have sounded only faintly in Keats's mind; but out of the wordless depths of feeling, the dream must have spoken unmistakably to him of one

> desire which he had struggled months to deny. Fanny Brawne had returned after her mysterious disappearance, the hundred-eyed world had been lulled into heedlessness, and his long winter was yielding to spring.67/
>
> In this period Keats felt himself to be an unstable atom in a world of instability. He was intensely conscious of the inseparable relationship of beauty and decay, joy and sorrow, life and death. Considering happiness to be mutable and transient, he longed to enjoy love in its richest bloom and to die.68/

Suddenly the listlessness was gone and Keats was once again partaking of active social life as well as almost insatiable composition. The sudden burst of activity could have been spurred by "his reprieve on a departure from Wentworth Place. Evidently about this time Brown had decided not to let his house till the end of June, and evidently this change of plan pleased Keats more than he would admit. Whatever it was that roused him out of his depression, it also tapped a new spring of poetry."69/

> Love was the first problem to test Keats's stoical acceptance of life. On April 3 Dilke moved to Wesminster and leased his half of Wentworth Place to Mrs. Brawne. And for nearly three months, . . . Keats and Fanny Brawne lived in adjoining houses which were under the same roof and in the same garden. He expressed the gamut of emotions which this daily intimacy with Miss Brawne aroused in him in the poems which he composed in the latter half of April and in the letters which he wrote her in July and August, after he had left Wentworth Place. This daily intimacy stirred him above all into an ecstatic intensity of passion, giving him on the whole more pleasure than pain.70/

Yet in this new air of happiness and revived poetic output, there also appeared dark overtones. Once again the financial problem raised its head as Abbey refused to give

Keats any money and the poet, as a result, was forced to withdraw his last hundred pounds and think of giving up poetry in favor of journalism and a livelihood. Also, Keats was worried about his sister's health. His deceptively light-hearted admonition to Fanny reflects his fear of the possible return of consumption, the terrible family disease: "You must make up your mind to get Stout this summer - indeed I have an idea we shall both be corpulent old folks with tripple chins and stumpy thumbs."71/ At this time Keats also discovered the Amena hoax that Charles Wells had played on his brother Tom and as a result was irrationally angry. From this discovery, his other various emotions, and Keats's "own dream encounter with a beautiful woman in a sorrowful world of pale-lipped lovers"72/ came La Belle Dame sans Merci.

The sources of the poem are varied, and Gittings best summarizes them and the overall effect of the poem.

> Wordsworth for the cadence of the poem, Coleridge for its nightmare quality, Spenser for its medieval setting, Burton for the melancholy of its hero, all contribute to, but none account for the intensity and underlying depth of a poem which brought Keats's darkest and most fundamental experiences to the surface. Much can be attributed to his identification of the knight with Tom, deceived by the false Amena, deluded, as Keats believed, by Wells's phantom lady, and betrayed to death, the whole horror of that death recalled by finding Wells's mocking letters. La Belle Dame is not only Love but Death, and Keats is reliving "on the pulses" Tom's death. Yet she was also much more to Keats himself. She was clearly connected with the dream of the Dante sonnet, and with the eternally tormented lovers of the Inferno . . . . . Speculation has been spent on whether the Lady is Fanny Brawne, or even Isabella, but

she is more archetypal than that. On the other hand, the Jungian claim that she represents the "false" poetry, from which he was now turning away towards philosophy, is an over-simplification too. She is, when all literary hints from other sources, when all the accidental events of Keats's day-to-day life are exhausted, the symbol of the eternal fusion of Love and Death.[73]

What is incredibly clear in this poem is Keats's linkage of love and death and the intensification of that jointure. He seriously questions whether love will corrupt and eventually cause the death of the Knight. He must have wondered whether his La Belle Dame was Fanny and if there were any way to escape her.

Despite the obvious references to Tom's Amena affair, there is included the problem of "the wasting power of love,"[74] which plagues Keats. Pettet aptly demonstrates the linkage of love and sleep in La Belle Dame; suggests that it is a theme found in the earlier Endymion; further suggests that the sleep is a death wish; and then states that this linkage of love and death shows the "wasting power of love".[75] This linkage and its fear "in no way invalidates his love for Fanny, for of course he was deeply in love with her; it merely expresses those warring contradictions we have already traced in his attitude."[76] Wilson Knight feels that Keats in La Belle Dame suggests there is "a potential hell within physical love."[77] This linkage is traced back to the letter in which he makes the Juliet-Charmian distinction, so it obviously is not a new thought. Yet the intensification of it and the

frequency with which it suddenly reappears must obviously be brought about by the deep love for Fanny. This love is one of the Beauties found in Why Did I Laugh? that Keats wanted but realized he could not completely gain without Death. Hence, here is one of the forerunners of the love-death and beauty-death linkages found in the great odes, particularly in Ode to a Nightingale, and in Bright Star. Quite obviously then, Keats was beginning to be worried about the destructive powers of love, particularly that which is physical or at least sensual, while at the same time he was delighted by the elevating aspects of an ideally consummated love.

> There was a continuous struggle in his mind between sex-passion and sex-antagonism. In his rebellious moments he regarded love as a possessive, enslaving, destructive passion. It restrained his personal liberty, he felt, it separated him from his friends, it distracted him from his poetry. We must observe, however, that love spurred him as well as checked him in the composition of poetry. It inspired him (in some cases pleasantly, in other cases painfully) in the composition of some of his greatest poems - The Eve of St. Agnes, The Eve of St. Mark, Bright Star! and La Belle dame sans merci. He composed his great odes also in the period of his daily association with Miss Brawne.[78]

Thus his dilemma and creativity grew stronger every day, and it becomes easier to see the confusion he felt about love and his own poetic mission, which cause him to undergo his self-imposed exile in June 1819. It is unfortunate, however, that Keats lacked the crystal ball necessary to see that his decision was wrong and that Fanny, who also may well have been a

destructive force to his poetry, was the catalyst he needed to write the great odes produced in the spring of 1819.

The period of May and June is the culmination of Keats's poetic achievement, and there can be no question that it is the result of the combining of love, which had many emotional ramifications; and "disinterestedness", which led Keats into the realization that great poetry was the linkage of strong emotive presentation and philosophical truths. Only when this combination occurs did Keats feel that great poetry could be produced, and it is reasonable to assume such a state of creativity could be achieved in pleasant living conditions - those conducive to composition. Quite obviously, the months Fanny and Keats spent together at Wentworth Place were a period stimulating such contentment. The two lovers daily shared the garden, discussed many concepts, and generally grew to know and love one another. The resulting atmosphere put Keats into the mood necessary to produce a tranquility found in the odes. Apparently the resultant atmosphere triggered such a desire for composition that Keats had no time to write letters or see many friends.

Keats had now, within about three weeks, written four of the great lyric poems in English. Whatever he thought of them (while composing them he was too preoccupied to write letters, and immediately afterwards other matters suddenly became urgent), they were at least bringing back the habit of composition, and with it some of the confidence that had

been so shaken during the previous months, though the rise in confidence was not apparent for a few weeks. Together, these four odes came to 227 lines, well over half the length of one of the books of Hyperion; and of course it was to Hyperion, or to something like it, that he really wanted to turn. Yet the thought of having to "strain my nerves at some grand Poem" so soon after being forced to put aside Hyperion also intimidated him. He would need time. But by the middle of May, time - at least for a few years - did not seem available.[79]

Although Keats had written what most critics consider to be his finest poetry, he felt the period one of indolence. The odes he dismissed as dabblings in an attempt to find the key for the motivation and inspiration necessary for a great epic. He ended the period with the Ode on Indolence, which he

> ended on a faint note of hope. "Farewell!" he told the phantoms of love, ambition and poetry,
>
> > Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
> > And for the day faint visions there is store . . .
>
> He still had hope of attaining some measure of happiness in love. He was resolving at this time . . . to compose poems, such as Lamia, which the public would like and buy, and plays, such as Otho the Great, which the public would pay to see.[80]

The period of indolence was over, the lyrics were written, and Keats was anxious to get on to larger things. The financial woes of both George, then in Kentucky losing half his

money, and himself almost forced Keats from poetry back to an occupation in which he could earn a living. In a letter to Miss Jeffry he states his dilemma:

> I have the choice as it were of two Poisons (yet I ought not to call this a Poison) the one is voyaging to and from India for a few years; the other is leading a fevrous life alone with Poetry - This latter will suit me best - for I cannot resolve to give up my Studies . . . Yes, I would rather conquer my indolence and strain my nerves at some grand Poem - than be in a dunderheaded indiaman . . . 81/

In a later letter to Miss Jeffry, Keats thanks her for counseling against the India idea and comments on his financial position by bitterly attacking the English for throwing their artists to the financial wolves.82/

Brown's plans to rent his house for the summer forced Keats to seek a summer residence, thus further upsetting him, and the recurrent sore throat was back, a factor causing him to delay a meeting with his sister.83/ Certainly his relationship with Fanny added to his unrest by forcing Keats to feel that his love and his obedience to it were depriving him of his poetic creativity. His desire to write a long, epic-like work also helped Keats analyze his position and decide to seek isolation in an attempt to avoid the "self-destroying" love and retain his "artistic integrity". Once again the dichotomy of love - the senses of attraction and repulsion84/ began to eat Keats, and he felt forced to leave Fanny in an attempt to write the poetry he desired to compose, a desire which was never to be

successful. Such an escape was immediately necessary as Keats suddenly decided to gather forces and publish once again in an attempt to alleviate his financial woes and thus put himself in a position to offer marriage to Fanny.

> He might devote himself to writing for just a few more months, if he could manage it financially. And in that case, he would try to put every other interest completely out of his mind. This would include Fanny Brawne . . . 85/

On June 27, Keats left for the Isle of Wight, where he was to remain in self-imposed exile until early October in an attempt to produce the poetry necessary for publication and, hopefully, financial success. Quite obviously, the separation of the two lovers was painful, and words of some lasting importance were spoken at that time.

> Some time before the end of June, he had at last arrived at some sort of understanding with Fanny. This was far from a formal engagement; he still had too little to offer Mrs. Brawne for that. He regarded Fanny as free in a way that would have been unthinkable in an engaged girl at that time, and could even contemplate "the worst that can happen" - that is, she might fall in love with and accept someone else. 86/

Whatever the established relationship was, it was strong, and almost as soon as Keats landed on the Isle of Wight, he wrote Fanny the first of the many deeply emotional letters he was to write her. It is through these letters that the intensity and anguish of this segment of the love affair comes to light.

In the first letter,[87] that of July 1, 1819, there is Keats's first recorded declaration of love: "The morning is the only proper time for me to write to a Beautiful Girl whom I love so much."[88] He rhapsodizes further, and no longer can there be any doubt that love had pervaded the air of Wentworth Place from April through June. Yet there are two other aspects of the letter which produce an unsettled or negative air about the affair.

> I have never known any unalloy'd Happiness for many days together: the death or sickness of some one has always spoilt my hours - and now when none such troubles oppress me, it is you confess very hard that another sort of pain should haunt me. Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom.[89]

Even in his self-imposed exile could Keats feel the pull of Fanny and did he fear her destructive influence upon his identity and hence his creativity. Even in his exile did he find the problem he had deliberately run from, and in this discovery of the poison of love there is no balm produced by the pleasures of love.

> Though I could centre my Happiness in you, I cannot expect you to engross your heart so entirely - indeed if I thought you felt as much for me as I do for you at this moment I do not think I could restrain myself from seeing you again tomorrow for the delight of one embrace.[90]

Herein lies the fear that Keats loves Fanny more than she him, and it is this remark plus the characteristic flirtatiousness which led Keats's friends and the pre-Lowell critics

to assume that the poet's jealousy was justified because of Fanny's heartlessness. This line, however, reflects more accurately Keats's remembrance of his mother's activities and his resulting latent fear of woman's inconstancy. Joanna Richardson feels that there was no reason for Keats to feel that Fanny loved him less than he loved her, and her claim is justified in the sense that the fear can be explained away in terms of Keats's own background. Murry interprets this passage in a different and more compassionate light:

> He [Keats] felt, partly because of his deeply and rightly sensuous nature, partly because of his inner warning that time might be very short, a devouring physical hunger for her, which she did not or did not yet reciprocate. A long engagement would burn him up. Either he must get himself into a position where he could marry her soon, or he must renounce her.91/

Keats's urgent need for love, the attraction and flirtatiousness of Fanny, his fear of woman's fickle nature, and the concept of "self-destroying" love all appear in this highly emotional and chaotically organized letter. Just where the affair was headed is reflected in the later letters.

On July 8, Keats wrote Fanny an obvious answer to a letter from her. What she said is reflected in his ecstatic reply. He protests that he loves her as a whole person, not as an object of beauty, although he readily admits that if she were not beautiful, he could not possibly love her. Hoping that this declaration will convince her of a complete

love, he continues:

> You say you are affraid I shall think you do not love me - in saying this you make me ache the more to be with you.92/

Quite obviously, Fanny has told Keats that she loves him as much as he loves her, and Keats is ecstatic. Temporarily his fears are gone and he continues:

> I love you more in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake and for nothing else - I have met with women whom I really think would like to be married to a Poem and to be given away by a novel.93/

Keats, the sufferer of an inferiority complex in the art of love, was delighted that a woman, one whom he adored, could love him as a man rather than as a poet. He saw that she too had depth of character, and he realized that, as a result, she was worth loving. "The new realism in his life included an honesty in his love affair, which she, brought up in the social habits of their time and class, may well have found disconcerting."94/ With this newly found realism came also the urge to write. In a letter to J. H. Reynolds,95/ Keats speaks of his progress on Otho the Great, his and Brown's hopes for theatrical success, and Lamia, a poem necessary for the completion of his volume to be published. He speaks also of hopes for artistic success but mentions that his broadened judgment will prepare him for and allow him to cope with possible failure. The agitation of mind or motivation for writing is obviously coupled with his love for Fanny and desire to be financially enough secure to marry

her. The poetic urge had been awakened by her, and at this point his sense of critical awareness was sharpened. At the same time, Keats was disturbed with his writing because he felt that it was artistic hackwork which would sell and be successful in one sense, and he was ashamed of the artistic compromise he had to make.

> I have three of four stories half done, but as I cannot write for the mere sake of press, I am obliged to let them progress or lie still as my fancy chooses. By Christmas perhaps they may appear, but I am not yet sure they ever will. T'will be no better, for Poems are as common as newspapers and I do not see why it is a greater crime in me than in another to let the verses of an half-fledged brain tumble into the reading-rooms and drawing room windows.96/

This justification for hack writing cannot be taken seriously because of its blatantly defensive air, which strongly suggests that Keats himself did not believe it. At any rate, Keats was writing rather copiously and was, as a result, fulfilling the purpose of his self-imposed exile.

In this same letter of July 15, to Fanny, Keats states that he has not been well and adds that he had taken Fanny's last letter to bed with him, where it had been damaged. He considers the harm an omen of their affair and once again stresses the agony of love rather than its opposite partner. The darkness and foreboding, which had plagued his life incessantly, were again making their presence known. The inescapable agony of mortality found in Ode to a Nightingale is hinted at in this letter, and it beckons to the

love-death linkage found in the July 25 letter and in Bright Star, which Aileen Ward convincingly shows to have been written at the same time as this letter.97/

In the letter of July 25, Keats clearly speaks of the agonies of love, the fear that Fanny does not love him so much as he loves her, the loss of his freedom as a result of that love, his own insecurity of being an object unworthy of love, the linkage of death and love, and the fear that his poetic creativity is being absorbed by his love. Assuredly this letter is not the product of an easy mind, nor is it the product of a naive lover living in the idyls of romance. Keats in this letter is facing the dilemma of any thinking, sensitive man: does work come before love and family or vice versa? At either poll, Keats is caught because the artist out of necessity is a selfish human being, a person who must cater to his own whims in an attempt to keep the creativity flowing; yet Keats was a man who needed to find a mate with whom he could share his life, sacrifice himself to, and find salve in togetherness. Inevitably Keats made the choice, although it was never fulfilled, of the mate because he was too much a feeling person to ignore this basic urge.

Although Bright Star was considered for many years to be Keats's final poem, the first draft was indeed written in 1819. Each critic has his theory as to when in 1819 the

sonnet was produced, and I find Aileen Ward's most convincing. There is no question, however, that the final version, which was written on September 28, 1820, when Keats was sailing to Italy,[98] is far superior to the first draft, produced on that lonely night when Keats was on the Isle of Wight. Through the many contrasts, the poem expresses the complete turmoil of Keats's mind on the subject of his romance.

> All the conflicts expressed in his letter to Fanny - the passion which absorbed him against his will, the longing to be assured of her love yet untroubled by the anxieties of marriage - are projected and momentarily resolved in the imagery of the sonnet. The contrasts so precariously balanced in the odes - between the timeless but unreal perfection of art and the time-bound realizations of life, between the unselfconscious joy of natural existence and the self-awareness of human experience - are repeated in a key of passionate urgency and pushed toward a synthesis of contradictions, an eternal calm within perfect sensuality, the ideal moment made actual. Knowing his desire was unattainable, yet still driven by it, Keats tried to resolve his dilemma not by finally submitting to the claims of consciousness, as in the odes, but by eluding them in a vision of death at the moment of supreme happiness. Yet metaphorically he did surmount his dilemma in the first half of the sonnet, which creates, in the imagination at least, an eternal joy.[99]

The eternal joy to Keats is "the bliss of love [which] made him yearn for 'an immorality of passion' even though he did not yield to the illusion that such an immortality was possible."[100] The eternal joy or the "immortality of passion" is possible only in a "timeless disinterested contemplation or a tranquil unconscious beauty . . . a state of being for which all his poetry had groped for an adequate symbol."[101]

Hence the star sits outside and watches the sea at work. But the human being must become involved, and so the move toward unconsciousness in the ideal is snapped with the realization that the human is mortal. Thus he must become involved and the perfection must remain an ideal, touchable only by death. Here then, in an autobiographical sense, lies the linkage of death and love for Fanny.

> There are critics who, admitting the excellence of the octet of the sonnet, frown upon its sestet. They prefer not to have a woman's breast juxtaposed with a star. Perhaps they have been too much in love with the dry light of reason to observe that Keats's sonnet, like the closing sentence of a letter in which he addressed Fanny Brawne as his "fair Star," is a prayer. Probably the prayer carries no expectation of fulfillment, but it is no less devout for that. To Keats the heart's affections were not base but holy. They were worthy of recognition by the powers of universe.
>
> Somewhere out in the cosmic void is the steadfastness of the star; inside a specific mental cosmos is the desire for that steadfastness. The star has splendor but is solitary. The mind of the poet loves beauty but shuns loneness. The star is cold and inhuman, at once naturalistic and Christian (nature's . . . Eremite"); the breast of a loved one is warm and intimate, at once profane and devout. The star is a symbol of light while it exists in the midst of darkness. There are light and darkness in the mental cosmos of a man; there are love and death. . . . The star, the night, the earth, the waters, and John Keats are all associated because there is, amid all their immeasurable desolation, a human mind to join them. It is only this mind which, by a conscious fiction, enables the nonhuman universe to suspend its eternal indifference and momentarily to look with interest on the human drama . . . His deepest intention is to present the irony, forever irreconcilable, of desire illimitable, and reachless object of desire.[102]

The agony of love and Keats's inevitable linkage in this sonnet of it and death is one of the strongest statements ever uttered of his dilemma. The forced exile in an attempt to forget Fanny and write was obviously not following the prescription. The "self-destructing love" was having a greater effect on Keats than he ever felt possible.

> The sonnet in fact implies a turning point in Keats's own direction. He had gone to Shanklin to write a volume of poetry whose success would make it possible for him to marry Fanny Brawne; now he realized he could accomplish this only by somehow stifling his passion for her. "You absorb me in spite of myself!" he cried in his letter. In the sestet of the sonnet the human observer reappears and at this the disinterested vision falters. The object it contemplates, the breathing body of the beloved woman, is the one in all the world most inimical to the vision; in the relinquishment which inevitably follows possession, Keats could imagine no return to the sustaining reality of the concrete world such as he found at the end of the odes. His momentary longing in May "to cease upon the midnight with no pain" now seemed the logical completion of his desire. To surrender his longing for Fanny meant, in imagination at least, turning toward death; rather than succumb to despair, he chose energy.103/

During this period of July, Keats and Brown were hard at work on Otho the Great. While Keats realized that the play was not particularly strong, he became excited by it and put more of himself into it. Into Ludolph especially went Keats's own irrational and suppressed romantic feelings.104/

> I leave this minute a scene in our Tragedy and see you (think it not blasphemy) through the mist of Plots speeches, counterplots and counter speeches - The Lover is madder than I am - I am nothing to him - he has a figure like the Statue of Maleager and double distilled fire in his heart.105/

Pettet's claim that the reverse of what Keats says is actually true is well-founded.106/ He shows that the plot and certainly Ludolph are colored by Keats's intense love for Fanny. He further supports his claim by citing examples of similar phrasings found in the play, in the letters, and in various poems of this July period. There seems to be little point in elaborating his view because it seems quite obvious. The pain of unsatisfied love, the jealousy Keats felt, and the imagined bliss of a fulfilled love are found here. The dilemma Keats was trying to avoid was everywhere.

The letter of August 5, 6, 1819, also reflects that Fanny's answer to Keats's extremely intense letter of a week earlier was a standard, stylized, flirtatious note. The coldness and seriousness of this letter shows Keats's possible jealousy over Fanny's dating other men, and by so doing reflects that there was no formal, binding engagement between them. Gittings suggests that Fanny's social activities during this period "added evident fuel to the holocaust of jealousy and destruction which Keats was now stoking for the last act of Otho."107/ Jealousy played a major part in Keats's life at this point, and although the motivation for it has usually been placed wrongly at Fanny's doorstep, it was really Keats's own sense of inadequacy which caused it. Two other comments about Keats's jealousy need to be made:

First, there was no third party involved and Keats knew it - his jealousy was of a more general nature.108/ Second,

> The uncertainty so necessary to jealousy is often being reinforced by his own divided attitude toward Fanny: reinforced by an uneasy, half-guilty suspicion that, while he himself is struggling against his affection for her, she may possibly be devoting at least a fraction of the same effort to questioning her affection for him. We are the more tempted to assume the presence of this common corollary of passionate love - common, at least, when there is also a desperate effort to fulfill another aim within a very limited time - because of his tendency to project on her other aspects of his own situation.109/

Again the agonies of love, the "self-destructing" portion of this emotion, find their way into his writing in Otho.

On August 16, Keats wrote a brutal letter to Fanny:

> Believe in the first Letters I wrote you: I assure you I felt as I wrote - I could not write so now - The thousand images I have had pass through my brain - my uneasy spirits - my unguess'd fate - all spread as a veil between me and you - Remember I have had no idle leisure to brood over you - 't is well perhaps I have not - I could not have endured the throng of Jealousies that used to haunt me before I had plunged so deeply into imaginary interests . . . . My heart seems now made of iron.110/

Jealousy and the recognition that love and Fanny must be put out of his mind are the motives behind this letter, which must have hurt Keats as much as its recipient. Yet the hardness is cut by the last line: "O my love, your lips are growing sweet again to my fancy - I must forget them - Ever your affectionate."111/ Since Otho the Great was developing smoothly, Keats possibly felt that he could be a successful popular writer, and he deliberately steeled himself against

Fanny so that he could work to earn enough to marry her. He mentions the impossibility of seeing her, and the correspondence breaks off for about four weeks.

> He was not resolving at this time, however, as he resolved a month later, to wean himself away from her. He was resolving merely to forget her for the present so that he could concentrate more effectively upon the composition of poems, by means of which he hoped to retrieve his fortunes and put himself in a position to marry her.112/

When the letters do pick up, however, there is every indication that any attempt Keats made to temporarily eliminate Fanny from his conscience was a miserable failure. In fact, among other things, they reflect a degree of jealousy, stemming largely from Keats's inability to see Fanny.

With the jealousy in Keats's mind, there was also, and primarily, the desire to write, to publish, and to marry. On top of all this came an incredible poetic flow, and Lamia, which Keats began before Otho the Great, was completed by September 5. Finney presents excellent groundwork for Keats's composition of this poem by showing that the poet was in such a state of "defiant egotism", despair over money, in the throes of love, and in a period of creative flow.113/ As a result, the poem reflects much about Keats, his theory of poetry, and his desire for permanence. Yet, we look at only one aspect - his affair with Fanny. Bates lists a variety of the biographical interpretations which 'dart at the relation with Fanny Brawne to the exclusion of other considerations . . .;114/

but by the time he gives this list, he has adequately shown that the poem cannot be reduced to such simple terms. He is, of course, quite right; yet it would be both unfortunate and incorrect to ignore the role of Keats's affair because it permeates the poem if in no other manner than the love-death linkage. The desire of a mortal to love an immortal, certainly a concept seen earlier in Bright Star, appears in Lamia, and just as the mortal lover fails to achieve his ideal of the immortal lover in the sonnet, so does he in the longer work.[115] The world is such that the contrasts of good-evil, illusion-reality, and perfection-reality come to haunt the lovers in the poem just as they plague Keats in his life. The love of Lycius and Lamia is doomed, and with its death must come also the death of the lovers involved. Certainly the melancholy Keats is playing with is greater than that found in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy; it stems from life. This idea is carried by Ridley:

> It is surely significant that Sir Sidney Colvin, who rates Lamia so low, is also trying, so far as his dominant honesty will permit him, to avert his eyes from the letters to Fanny Brawne. But if we are to understand Lamia, and to realize the gulf across which there was no path of return, which separates it from The Eve of St. Agnes, we must read those letters.[116]

This poem is about experience in life, the awakening to the realization that dreams of illusion must be replaced by existence in reality. Quite pointedly, Keats says that, if

one is unable to realize that his unnatural or immortal wishes cannot be granted, then he must die. Lycius fails to understand Lamia, and Lamia fails to realize the impossibility of her desire to permanently regain human form. Apollonius sees through the sham of reality, and hence he can live. He cannot be admired or liked, however, because he, unlike most mortals, has no yearning for the unreachable. Unfortunately Keats, living in the reality of poverty and sickness, as well as unsure love, reached, but knew his attempt was fruitless.

Beneath Lycius's concept of ideal beauty found in Lamia is the unpleasant, the reality of the plaguing serpent. This picture parallels the general tone and theme found in Keats's letters to Fanny, who plays the same role to Keats. While the eventual outcome of the two seems to be different in that Lamia dies while Fanny lives, marries, and has children, there is left open the probability that a major part of her died along with Keats. Despite my last questionable conjecture, the role of false temptress is found in both women, one fictional, one real.

Lycius is blinded by an illusory future - the chance to grasp immortal, permanent beauty - and slowly but surely his world must crumble so that he reaches the dilemma of facing reality or finding inevitable death. Keats too faced such a dilemma, but it is couched in slightly different terms.

The illusion of a permanent beauty found jointly in the immortality of art and the happiness of a successful mortal life had to be shattered. Keats's fear of his loss of creativity through love and his incredible need for love showed that his immortal peace of mind could never be achieved. On top of this realization came the indignities of poor health and unhappy financial affairs to further drive away the dreams of illusion. Unlike Lycius, Keats could accept what he had to face, and probably as a result he had a far less comfortable but more dramatic life and death than did his fictional counterpart. In this sense comes another of the autobiographical aspects within the play.

Aileen Ward makes a worthwhile pertinent comment about autobiographical data in Lamia.

> Two unabashed images from Endymion describing sexual pleasure as feeding at the breast suggest the origin of the metaphor, which also occurs in his letters to Fanny Brawne, when Keats twice speaks of trying to wean himself from her. This identification of food with love is rooted in our biological nature, of course; but its constant recurrence in Keats's poetry suggests that the biological process had an unusually deep significance for him . . . This recurrent image suggests the early fear of surrender to love, from which Keats had not yet successfully freed himself; and the resurgence of this fear must underlie the transformation of the love feast that takes place between The Eve of St. Agnes, written in the first confident flush of his love for Fanny Brawne, and the later poems, produced in a period of intense anxiety and jealousy. Love as Keats had once learned, is the prelude to

> death; and the death following the moment of possession, for which he longed in the Bright Star sonnet, now seemed to him not so much the only assurance of unchanging love he could imagine as the consequence of a love that is inevitably an illusion or betrayal.117/

Yet this tantalizingly biographical interpretation must be handled carefully because the poem has broader ramifications.

> In fact, Lamia is perhaps the most consciously artistic of all Keats's productions; he was in control of the poem, and if he used autobiographical details, it was in a much more deliberate sense than these immediate explanations suggest. He himself judged that it was entirely free from what he called "inexperience of life, and simplicity of knowledge." In other words, it looked at life, and not merely at the limited area of his own life, as a whole, with all its essential contradictions.118/

Keats was very pleased with Lamia, but the exuberance he felt in the September 5 letter to John Taylor119/ was short-lived because on September 10, he received bad news from his brother George and had to go to London, where he could deal with Abbey.120/ He went immediately to London, but in his spare time he did not go to see Fanny, and his letter to her on September 13 must have come as an unpleasant surprise.

> If I were to see you today it would destroy the half-comfortable sullenness I enjoy at present into downright perplexities. I love you too much to venture to Hampstead, I feel it is not paying a visit, but venturing into fire . . . Knowing well that my life must be passed in fatigue and trouble, I have been endeavoring to wean myself from you: for to myself alone what can be much of a misery? As far as they regard myself I can despise all events: but I cannot cease to love you.121/

Keats must have really been in a dilemma here because he turned away from Fanny, the only source of pleasure he had. His financial world was crumbling about him, and maybe he was simply afraid to see Fanny and falsely build both their hopes toward marriage. Keats knew that with the worsening of his financial condition came also the lessening of his chances for marriage. He once again steeled himself against Fanny and toyed with the possibility of becoming a journalist and thus earn a living.

After an unsuccessful visit with Abbey, Keats returned to Winchester, where he tried to pick up the pieces. The landscape and weather were lovely, and from them he gained enough tranquility to write To Autumn, the culmination of his endeavors in the odes. He also began The Fall of Hyperion, which hopefully was to fulfill his great urge to write an epic. It dealt with the same philosophic problems found in Hyperion and Lamia, but by the time Keats began this work he was confused by the epic form, worn out from poetic frustration, unhappy as a result of his financial and amorous situations, and ill. The work, which contains some great passages, was never finished, and thus it never fulfilled Keats's desire. He struggled mightily through September, but in a letter to J. H. Reynolds on September 21, he says:

> I have given up Hyperion - There were too many Miltonic inversions in it - Miltonic verses cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up. It may be interesting to you to pick out some lines from Hyperion and put a mark X to the false beauty proceeding from art, and one// to the true voice of feeling.[122]

> The explanation avoided numerous other and more essential complexities. So much else was pressing him now. What could he say?
>
> He put the poem aside, apparently for good. There is a certain poignance in hearing that, as the winter approached, he sometimes took it out again. "In the evenings, at his own desire," said Brown, Keats would go off alone to a "separate sitting-room," and there try to "remodel" Hyperion - a task his own critical judgement had told him was fruitless, or at least less valuable than making a new start. But by the winter of 1819, it was too late to make a fresh start.[123]

The problems Keats faced at this time are greatly reflected in the battery of letters he wrote in late September. His failure to continue his quest of the Hyperion project is of lesser importance than his search for an occupation to give him sustinence, a desire to publish, the need to find a place to live, increasing financial frustration, weaning himself, Brown, etc.

At the beginning of October, Keats returned to London and tried to live by himself. Bate conjectures that at this time Keats grew progressively more ill and helpless[124] and that he had to return to Hampstead, where he once again lived with Brown. One thing is sure: his self-imposed exile from Fanny was over, and on October 10, Keats and Fanny became engaged.

> Keats could not keep away from her any more. They met on October 10th and Fanny showed him plainly that to be parted from him had been pain to her. Her joy at seeing him again was so obvious and so sincere that it burned away in a flame of rapture all his doubts and all his resolutions. She was his woman, and he was her man. I can imagine that Keats went to Wentworth Place on that day "to see Brown" - as one part of him would tell himself - in order to take away the possessions and books which were stored in Brown's house: the rest of him went with a different purpose - to submit to the working of the prophecy.125/

The engagement was not well received by Keats's circle, but it was acknowledged as a thing to live with.

> "It is a quite settled thing between John Keats and Miss Brawne," wrote one of them, "God help them. It's a bad thing for them. The mother says she cannot prevent it and that her only hope is that it will go off. He don't like anyone to look at her or to speak to her." This was the general tone of their circle.126/

Russell127/ shows how Keats during the autumn of 1819 gains a maturity or depth of understanding of love and loses his naive idealization of women. His love, instead of transcending the real to reach the ideal, takes on the aspect of the destruction of the lover through overabundance of passion. This shift is paralleled with Keats's engagement and subsequent realization that he would never be free from passion, and, what's more, he was a more fully developed individual by being thus bound. Many of Keats's later letters show this transformation, and we shall look at some.

III

With the engagement came an immediate euphoria found in the letters of October 11 and 13 and in The Day is Gone, written on October 10.128/

> I am living to day in yesterday: I was in a complete facination all day. I feel myself at your mercy . . . . I have had a thousand kisses, for which with my whole soul I thank love . . . 129/

> I must write you a line or two and see if that will assist in dismissing you from my Mind for ever so short a time. Upon my soul I can think of nothing else - The time is passed when I had power to advise and warn you against the unpromising morning of my Life - My Love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you . . . 130/

> The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone!
> Sweet voice, sweet lips, soft hand, and softer breast,
> Warm breath, light whisper, tender semi-tone,
> Bright eyes, accomplish'd shape, and lang'rous waist!
>
> . . .
>
> But, as I've read love's missal through today,
> He'll let me sleep, seeing I fast and pray.131/

Yet in these ramblings there are definite statements leading back to the problems Keats has with Fanny. He is at her mercy; he no longer has the power to resist her, and thus, he no longer has the power to wipe her from his mind so he can create. In lieu of this train of thought, it should not be surprising to hear Keats only one week later say,

> I must impose chains upon myself - I shall be able to do nothing - I should like to cast the die for Love or death - I have no Patience with anything else . . . my mind is in a tremble, I cannot tell what I am writing. 132/

The torment of August still rages within him even though he has made the choice of mate over work.

> What can I do to drive away
> Remembrance from my eyes?
>
> . . .
>
> What can I do to kill it and be free
> In my old liberty?

How can he regain the poetic touch after the commitment of himself to slavery under Fanny?

> How shall I do
> To get anew
> Those moulted feathers, and so mount once more
> Above, above
> The reach of fluttering Love,
> and make him cower lowly while I soar?133/

The answer to Keats's plea is that it was an impossibility. Love helped him lose the touch, but tuberculosis hit Keats with a vengeance and robbed him forever of happiness in love or poetry. Keats's career was finished, and he, who had been trained in medicine and who had nursed a mother and younger brother in their fights against consumption, knew that he was finished. The despair set in, and he grew jealous of Fanny only because he knew that he could never have her. As a result, he wrote some few poems, remarkable only in their anguish.

> Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast?
> What stare outfaces now my silver moon?
> Ah! keep that hand unravish'd at the least;
> Let, let, the amorous burn -
> But, pr'ythee, do not turn
> The current of your heart from me so soon,
> O! save, in charity,
> The quickest pulse for me.134/

I cry your mercy-pity-love! - aye, love!
  Merciful love that tantalizes not,
One-thoughted, never-wandering, guileless love,
  Unmask'd, and being seen without a blot!
O! let me have thee whole - all-all - be mine![135]

I hesitate to quote "This living hand" simply because of its questionable authorship. But, nevertheless, the point is made. The agonizingly jealous Keats begs for a perfect, loyal mate. Yet the jealousy stems from his recognition of his own inadequacy, not a blame on Fanny's behavior. The hauntings of his mother and the old feelings of inferiority with women came back with a vengeance with the tuberculosis. Keats, not Fanny, was to blame for this renewed jealousy. In any case, the old dilemma of poetry and love remained.

There is another break in communication between Keats and Fanny, and it is probably the result of increased illness and the everyday contact between the two lovers. Although Keats tried to write, he lacked the strength, conviction, or desire to produce anything of note. King Stephen was never finished and Cap and Bells, while amusing, is not worthy of much note. Certainly the winter of 1819 was the beginning of the last and bleakest segment of Keats's life.

Murry, in an extremely poignant essay,[136] reverses his earlier vituperative attack on Fanny Brawne and shows that she was a very positive force on Keats's life. In so doing, he closely follows many of Keats's letters, especially the later ones, in an attempt to show that Keats was caused

undue agony when he was forcibly separated from Fanny and sent to Italy, long after his chance of recovery was hopeless. Murry's eventual claim is that while Fanny may have had detrimental effects on some of Keats's poetry, she was really the inspiration which enabled him to organize everything in his head and cause the creativity to flow. Thus, if we were to assess her role, says Murry, we would have to say that the catalyst function outweighs the negative aspects, which we cannot ignore, and we are left with the idea that, even though she caused Keats anguish, she was a definite boon to him and to the lovers of English poetry.

This bittersweet situation is very apparent in the final 29 letters from Keats to Fanny and his final letter to Mrs. Brawne. On Thursday, February 3, Keats coughed up blood and for the first time knew definitely that he was going to die. When he is confined to bed, his letters to Fanny resume, and one can only surmise that they resume primarily because Keats's friends, out of the best intentions, try to keep Fanny from being a constant companion. These letters reflect the whole gamut of Keats's attitude toward Fanny, love, sickness, death, and his own failure. Certainly, the dilemmas Keats felt from February 4, 1820, until his death are found in these letters.

> The consciousness that you love me will make a pleasant prison of the house next to yours.[137]

> If illness makes such an agreeable variety in the manner of your eyes I should wish you sometimes to be ill . . . . You must believe you shall, you will that I can do nothing say nothing think nothing of you but what has its spring in the Love which has so long been my pleasure and torment . . . . I assure you I felt it possible I might not survive and at that moment thought of nothing but you.[138]

The love-death relationship is openly stated here, and at the point of death he sees his ultimate beauty, a concept found earlier in his poetry.

> In my present state of Health I feel too much separated from you and could almost speak to you in the words of Lorenzo's Ghost to Isabella
>
> Your Beauty grows upon me and I feel
> A greater love through all my essence steal
>
> My greatest torment since I have known you has been the fear of you being a little inclined to the Cressid; but that suspicion I dismiss utterly and remain happy in the surety of your Love, which I assure you is as much a wonder to me as a delight.[139]

The old fear of inadequacy once again appears, but for the first time it is coupled with peace of mind rather than jealousy. At last he is at rest on this account, but the tranquility is to be short-lived.

> According to all appearances I am to be separated from you as much as possible. How I shall be able to bear it, or whether it will not be worse than your presence now and then, I cannot tell . . . Let me no longer detain you from going to Town . . . You know our situation - what hope is there if I should be recovered ever so soon . . . I wish I had even a little hope.[140]

The fight against the inevitable is taxing Keats to the breaking point. He releases Fanny, yet hates doing it. In another day, he regroups his strength and goes back to his standard line.

> I do not think I could bear the thought of losing you.141/

> I would fain that you call me Love still. To see you happy and in high spirits is a great consolation to me - still let me believe that you are not half so happy as my restoration would make you . . . . My sweet creature when I look back upon the pains and torments I have suffer'd for you from the day I left you to go to the Isle of Wight; the ecstasies in which I have pass'd some days and the miseries in their turn, I wonder the more at the Beauty which has kept up the spell so fervently . . . . "If I should die," said I to myself, "I have left no immortal work behind me - nothing to make my friends proud of my memory - but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd." Thoughts like these came very feebly whilst I was in health and every pulse beat for you . . . 142/

This letter has been used by critics to show that Keats himself blames Fanny for her nefarious influence on his poetry. Quite on the contrary, it shows, I think, his thanks to her for giving him a desire to have a love for beauty and life. The wish to leave something worthy is made in a wistful and good sense - a desire to create, with her help, something eternally beautiful. Such a wish is the highest kind of praise a man can bestow upon his lover.

> The power of your benediction is of not so weak a nature as to pass from the ring in four-and-twenty hours - it is like a sacred Chalice once consecrated and ever consecrate.143/

Here is the religious air, the transferral of the affair from a sensual, human state to the ethereal, religious plain, as seen to a lesser degree in The Eve of St. Agnes. It is soon coupled with a desperate declaration:

> You fear, sometimes, I do not love you so much as you wish? My dear Girl I love you ever and ever without reserve. The more I have known you the more have I lov'd. In every way - even my jealousies have been agonies of Love, in the hottest fit I would have died for you. I have vex'd you too much. But for Love! 144/

Here is the statement clearing all doubts about the continuation of his love-work dilemma. Once illness has forced him from his work, he commits everything to his master, Fanny. Such a love is not amusing or trifling; it is deadly serious and should be taken as such.

> Perhaps on your account I have imagined my illness more serious than it is: how horrid was the chance of slipping into the ground instead of your arms - the difference is amazing Love-Death must come at last . . . 145/

The love-death linkage is still here but it is not consistent. Love now has greater beauty and appeal than death.

> You could not step or move an eyelid but it would shoot to my heart - I am greedy of you - Do not think of any thing but me. Do not live as if I was not existing - Do not forget me - 146/

As Keats's health grew more hopeless, so grew his jealousy in the sense that he would lose Fanny to life and he could not bear the thought. Such unhappiness is to be pitied rather than berated. Here speaks a lonely, sick man, who wishes only for his own health and happiness. What unbearable agony he carried! He admits his state of mind in the next letter.

> I am sorry - at times I feel bitterly sorry I ever made you unhappy - my excuse is that those words have been wrung from me by the sharpness of my

> feelings. At all events and in any case I have been wrong; could I believe that I did it without any cause, I should be the most sincere of Penitents.147/

> I have been a walk this morning with a book in my hand, but as usual I have been occupied with nothing but you: I wish I could say in an agreeable manner. I am tormented day and night. They talk of my going to Italy. 'Tis certain I shall never recover if I am to be so long separate from you . . . 148/

Murry uses this passage to attack Keats's friends for putting the poet under far breater agony than he ever deserved. He is somewhat strong in his attack, but his point is well made. Keats was forced to undergo tremendous mental torment for an attempt, which was too late, to save his life. His near death was inevitable, and he would have been far better off remaining in England, where he could, at least, be with the person he loved.

In the last letter Keats wrote to Fanny, he reiterated his unhappiness.

> I wish you could invent some means to make me at all happy without you. Every hour I am more and more concentrated in you; every thing else tastes like chaff in my Mouth. I feel it almost impossible to go to Italy - the fact is I cannot leave you, and shall never taste one minute's content until it pleases chance to let me live with you for good . . . To be happy with you seems such an impossibility! it requires a luckier Star than mine! it will never be.149/

The letter continues in desolation, a mood both understandable and pitiable, and in general Keats became increasingly full of despair as his health degenerated. In fact, he can no longer grasp the strength necessary to write Fanny, and so he writes her mother.

> I dare not fix my Mind upon Fanny, I have not dared to think of her. The only comfort I have had that way has been in thinking for hours together of having the knife she gave me put in a silver-case - the hair in a Locket - and the Pocket Book in a gold net - Show her this. I dare say no more - . . . My Love again to Fanny - . . . Good bye Fanny! god bless you.150/

Yet he thought of her incessantly, and those thoughts only increased his despair. He finally reached the point that he could no longer bear to read her letters, for they threw him into even deeper agony by reminding him that what he really wanted could never be had. Such was his state of mind when he died on February 23, 1821.

IV

In a large sense, I have neglected Fanny's side of the relationship, but I have done so deliberately only because I could not surpass Murry's and Lowell's analyses of her growth from a flirtatious young girl to a fully devoted, loving woman. That she married in 1833 further proves that she was too vibrant a woman to sit in spinsterhood.

> She was thinking of marriage, and no doubt desired to be married. What had been between her and Keats belonged to another life, frozen in the irrevocable past, living still in her memory and (if Fanny could have her way) her memory alone. She now had another life to lead.151/

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn about the love between Keats and Fanny is that it is pathetic in its outcome, strong and fully enveloping in its life, and more beneficial than detrimental to Keats's poetry. Even though Fanny distracted Keats, sometimes to the point of fury, she inspired him. She acted as the catalyst necessary to trigger that incredibly fertile spring of 1819. She taught him how to overcome his fear of women and experience life, thereby opening the doors of life and allowing the great poetic creativity to escape.

Notes

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3. Ward, p. 15-16.
4. Walter J. Bate, John Keats (Boston, 1963), p. 362.
5. Robert Gittings, John Keats (London, 1968), p. 267.
6. To ***, To Emma, To G.A.W., Acrostic.
7. Letters I, p. 392.
8. Letters I, p. 395-396.
9. Gittings, p. 139.
10. Letters I, p. 402-403.
11. Bate, p. 420.
12. Letters II, p. 8.
13. Letters II, p. 13-14.
14. Bate, p. 425.
15. Sidney Colvin, Keats (London, 1889), p. 131.
16. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 22.
17. Amy Lowell, The Life of John Keats, 2 vols. (Boston, 1925), II, p. 129-130.
18. Richardson, p. 23.
19. Lowell II, p. 128.
20. Claude Finney, The Evolution of Keats' Poetry, 2 vols. (New York, 1963), II p. 483.

21. Ward, p. 235.

22. Fred Edgecumbe, ed., The Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), p. 49.

23. Edgecumbe, p. 52.

24. Bate, p. 427.

25. Gittings, p. 266.

26. Joanna Richardson, The Everlasting Spell (Mystic, Conn., 1966), p. 37.

27. Katherine M. R. Kenyon, "When Did Keats and Fanny Brawne Become Engaged?", Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin, XIII (1962), p. 4-7. The reference inside the parentheses comes from Edgecumbe, p. 3; a letter dated September 18, 1820, in which Fanny says, "for I have known your brother for two years . . ." I cannot consider this line valid as proof for the September meeting because I find it unlikely that Fanny meant exactly two years. Rather, she was probably speaking with the vagueness that humans generally have when recalling some past event.

28. Letters I, p. 395.

29. Letters II, p. 132.

30. Aileen Ward, "Christmas Day 1818", Keats-Shelley Journal, X (1961), p. 15-17.

31. Lowell II, p. 148; Richardson, p. 26, Tom Burns Haber, "The Unifying Influence of Love in Keats's Poetry", PQ XVI (1937), p. 192-209.

32. Edgecumbe, p. 41

33. Aileen Ward, "Christmas Day 1818", Keats-Shelley Journal X (1961), p. 15-27.

34. Lowell II, p. 149.

35. Letters II, p. 4.

36. Letters II, p. 4.

37. Aileen Ward, John Keats: The Making of a Poet (New York, 1960), p. 238

38. Ward, p. 239.

39. Letters I, p. 387.

40. Stanley C. Russell, "'Self-Destroying' Love in Keats", Keats-Shelley Journal, XVI (1967), p. 87.

41. Murry, in Keats (Oxford, 1955); Ward; Bate; et al.

42. Sidney Colvin, John Keats, His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics, and After-Fame (London, 1917), p. 334.

43. Hugh D'Anson Fausset, Keats: A Study in Development (Hamden, Conn., 1966), p. 104, 105.

44. Finney II, p. 545, 546.

45. Ward, p. 237.

46. Finney II, p. 538

47. Bate, p. 437

48. Gittings, p. 283.

49. Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems (Baltimore, 1967), p. 120, 121.

50. Letters II, p. 162.

51. Bate, p. 440.

52. Jack Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in The Eve of St. Agnes", Keats, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), p. 82, 83.

53. Bate, p. 446, 447.

54. Bate, p. 447.

55. Finney II, p. 560.

56. Ward, p. 245, 246.

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60. Murry, p. 36.

61. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, 1957), p. 215, note 2.

62. Bate, p. 460

63. Letters II, p. 79-81.

64. Bate, p. 475.

65. Finney II, p. 581.

66. Ward, p. 269.

67. Ward, p. 270.

68. Finney II, p. 588.

69. Ward, p. 271, 272.

70. Finney II, p. 586.

71. Letters II, p. 52.

72. Ward, p. 273.

73. Gittings, p. 303, 304.

74. Colvin, p. 166.

75. Pettet, p. 214, 215.

76. Pettet, p. 216.

77. C. Wilson Knight, The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision (New York, 1960), p. 276.

78. Finney II, p. 591.

79. Bate, p. 524.

80. Finney II, p. 648.

81. Letters II, p. 112-113.

82. Letters II, p. 115.

83. Letters II, p. 119.

84. Russell, p. 79.

85. Bate, p. 526.

86. Gittings, p. 327, 328.

87. Letters II, p. 122-124.

88. Letters II, p. 122.

89. Letters II, p. 123.

90. Letters II, p. 123.

91. Murry, p. 39.

92. Letters II, p. 127.

93. Letters II, p. 127,

94. Gittings, p. 330.

95. Letters II, p. 128.

96. Letters II, p. 130.

97. Ward, p. 296.

98. Thorpe, p. 329, note 1.

99. Ward, p. 298.

100. Ford, p. 116.

101. Ward, p. 298.

102. Ford, p. 145, 146.

103. Ward, p. 300.

104. Gittings, p. 332.

105. Letters II, p. 137.

106. Pettet, p. 240, 241.

107. Gittings, p. 332.

108. Bate, p. 541.

109. Bate, p. 541.

110. Letters II, p. 140, 141.

111. Letters II, p. 142.

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113. Finney II, p. 684-687.

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115. Ford, p. 142-145.

116. M. R. Ridley, Keats' Craftmanship: A Study in Poetic Development (New York, 1962), p. 265.

117. Ward, p. 309, 310.

118. Gittings, p. 337.

119. Letters II, p. 155-157.

120. Bate, p. 576.

121. Letters II, p. 160.

122. Letters II, p. 167.

123. Bate, p. 605.

124. Bate, p. 612.

125. Murry, p. 46, 47.

126. Gittings, p. 362.

127. Russell, p. 79-91.

128. Thorpe, p. 378, note 1.

129. Letters II, p. 222.

130. Letters II, p. 223.

131. Thorpe, p. 378.

132. Letters II, p. 224.

133. Thorpe, p. 379.

134. Thorpe, p. 279. There is a serious question about the dating of this poem, and I have used Bate's, which is found in Bate, 620, note 13, because it places the poem in the proper thematic place of Keats's career.

135. Thorpe, p. 380.

136. Murry, p. 19-81.

137. Letters II, p. 250.

138. Letters II, p. 254.

139. Letters II, p. 256.

140. Letters II, p. 257.

141. Letters II, p. 259.

142. Letters II, p. 263.

143. Letters II, p. 270.

144. Letters II, p. 275.

145. Letters II, p. 277.

146. Letters II, p. 290.

147. Letters II, p. 292.

148. Letters II, p. 303.

149. Letters II, p. 311, 312.

150. Letters II, p. 350.

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